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# A Review of Issues and Practices Regarding Fugitive Units



PREPARED BY

Sara D. Meacham

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS  
PLANNING AND RESEARCH SECTION  
P. O. BOX 41108  
OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON 98504-1108  
(360) 753-6180

NOVEMBER 2001

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## INTRODUCTION

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Many agencies in charge of supervising offenders in the community do not proactively attempt to relocate offenders who have absconded, especially when officers have high caseloads. A common practice throughout the country is to issue a warrant and wait for absconders to get themselves rearrested or picked up from another violation (Parent et al. 1994, xiii). However, local police departments fail to give top priority to apprehending absconders even though research indicates that absconders tend to remain in the county where they are being supervised (Parent et al. 1994, xiii). In Whatcom County, Washington, it was discovered that “a lot of the police officers in the area knew where [the offenders] were, [and] for some, the police even had more up-to-date addresses” (Buisch 2001, 65). Nonetheless, most absconders who are apprehended are caught by accident or non-proactive means (Parent et al. 1994, xiii).

The number of absconders has increased due to legislative and internal policy changes within state corrections departments to toll sentences when offenders are absent from community supervision. “In the past, time continued to run on sentences while offenders were on absconder status. This ‘release valve’ limited the size of the absconder population” (Parent et al. 1994, xiii). This increase in absconder cases and new crimes committed by absconders (especially the highly visible crimes against persons) have compelled departments to develop more proactive ways to bring absconders back under agency supervision (Parent et al. 1994, xiii). While data on absconders and subsequent units established to deal with them is lacking, new research on absconder characteristics has contributed to several efforts to reform fugitive units (Williams et al. 2000, 24).

### **What We Know about Absconders**

Although there is little research-based information on absconders, and even less on predicting who might abscond or about fugitive units to apprehend them, there have been four studies of particular interest. Literature on absconders is relevant to a paper on fugitive units because locating absconders is what fugitive units are designed to do. Program planners must know something about the population the program will be dealing with. Therefore, a brief literature review on what we know about absconders is presented below.

The earliest of the four relevant studies is Feder's (1989) study. Although Feder's study did not investigate all subgroups within the whole absconder population, it did show that mentally ill offenders were less likely to abscond (Williams et al. 2000, 25). Chard-Wierschem, (1995) in an analysis of temporary-release inmates, found that offenders who are less likely to abscond are women offenders, older offenders, offenders with more previous incarcerations, offenders who had served longer periods of time in confinement and those who were close to their parole eligibility dates (Williams et al.

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2000, 25). In contrast, offenders sentenced to shorter prison terms presented the greatest risk of absconding (Williams et al. 2000, 25). Comparing nonabsconders with absconders in Ohio, Schwaner (1997) found that the most predictive variables for the latter were the number of felony convictions, length of time between consecutive arrests, previous incarcerations, and the amount of probation revocations. Schwaner also found that the offender's type of crime, the number of states the offender had been arrested in, the presence of drug and alcohol abuse, the number of times the offender had been on supervision and the risk assessment level assigned were variables all related to whether or not the offender would be apprehended (Schwaner 1997, 20). Furthermore, Schwaner found that "higher risk absconders were more likely to be caught; however, overall, the absconding group was of no greater threat to society – perhaps even less-than nonabsconding parolees" (Williams et al. 2000, 25). The fourth study of particular interest showed that males and females abscond at the same rate. Both black and white offenders were more likely to abscond compared to other races (Williams et al. 2000, 30). However, research indicates that the three most significant predictors of whether or not an offender will abscond are unstable living arrangements, frequent unemployment, and previous supervision violations (Williams et al. 2000, 33). In short, what this research shows is that absconders are different from nonabsconders and that absconding is not a strong indicator of who might recidivate while being supervised in the community.

A lack of a valid tool to predict absconders has resulted in a questionable reliance on the general classification and risk/recidivism tools. In 1997, nationwide, approximately 187,000 offenders supervised in the community were sent back to prison for failure to comply with their conditions of supervision (Williams et al. 2000, 25). Absconders constitute a significant percentage of offenders returning to prison from community supervision, and most absconders who are sent back, just have technical violations; only a small percentage commit new crimes (Williams et al. 2000, 25). Because of this, it is reasonable to assume that absconding should be distinguished from recidivism or parole/supervision failure. Absconding simply provides for a greater opportunity to reoffend while absent from supervision, but does not indicate that a new crime will be committed. The only variable that can reliably predict both supervision failure and absconding is whether a released offender has violated his/her supervision conditions in the past (Williams et al. 2000, 33). Other variables that are predictive of supervision or parole failure do not contribute to the prediction of absconding. A fugitive unit designed to predict and intervene in offender behavior before they commit a new crime (while absent from supervision) should not use risk or recidivism assessment tools to try to target who will absent themselves from supervision. More research is needed on the different types of absconders and what actually occurs while these offenders are absent from supervision.

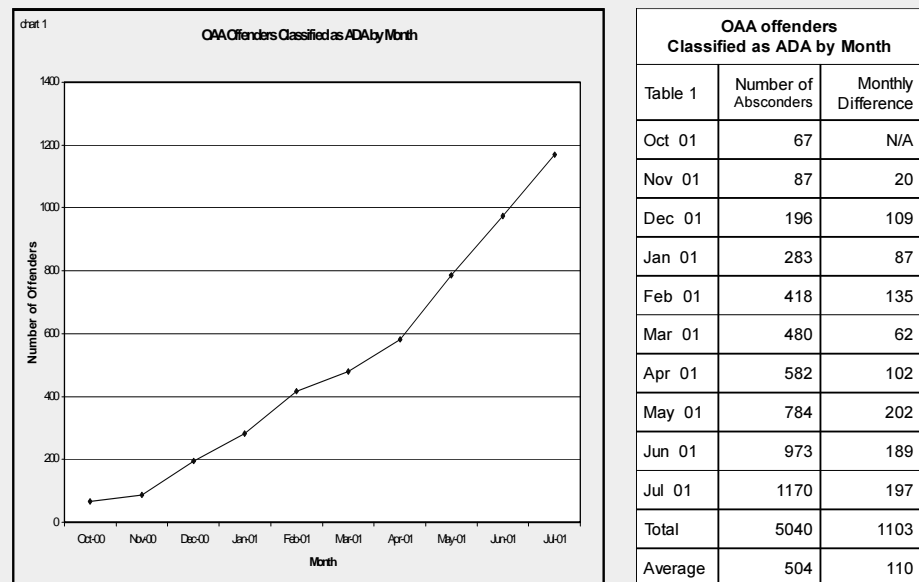
While the available research indicates that offenders who have absconded will not necessarily reoffend, it does tell us that absconders with prior supervision violations and previous felony convictions tend to be somewhat unstable (Williams et al. 2000,

31). “Only one factor might be unexpected: Absconders tend to be less dangerous and less risky parolees” (Williams et al. 2000, 35). In conclusion, because absconders represent such a large group of problem offenders on supervision, some proactive measures need to be taken. However, it appears that more research is needed to address this problem adequately. “If reliable profiles of absconders can be developed, then risk of absconding may be calculated in addition to traditional risk of recidivism scores” (Williams et al. 2000, 24).

## Offender Accountability Act Abscond Experience

Since implementation of the Offender Accountability Act (OAA), nearly 14 percent of offenders were sentenced for crimes committed after June 30, 2000, have absconded while supervised in the community. As of July 31, 2001, 8.4 percent of OAA offenders with community supervision requirements were on “abscond status” as indicated by being classified ADA, the administrative classification used for offenders who are on inactive status because they cannot be contacted and have a warrant in-process or issued for their arrest (see chart 1). Based on recent trends, the Department can anticipate an average increase of more than 110 new OAA absconders each month .

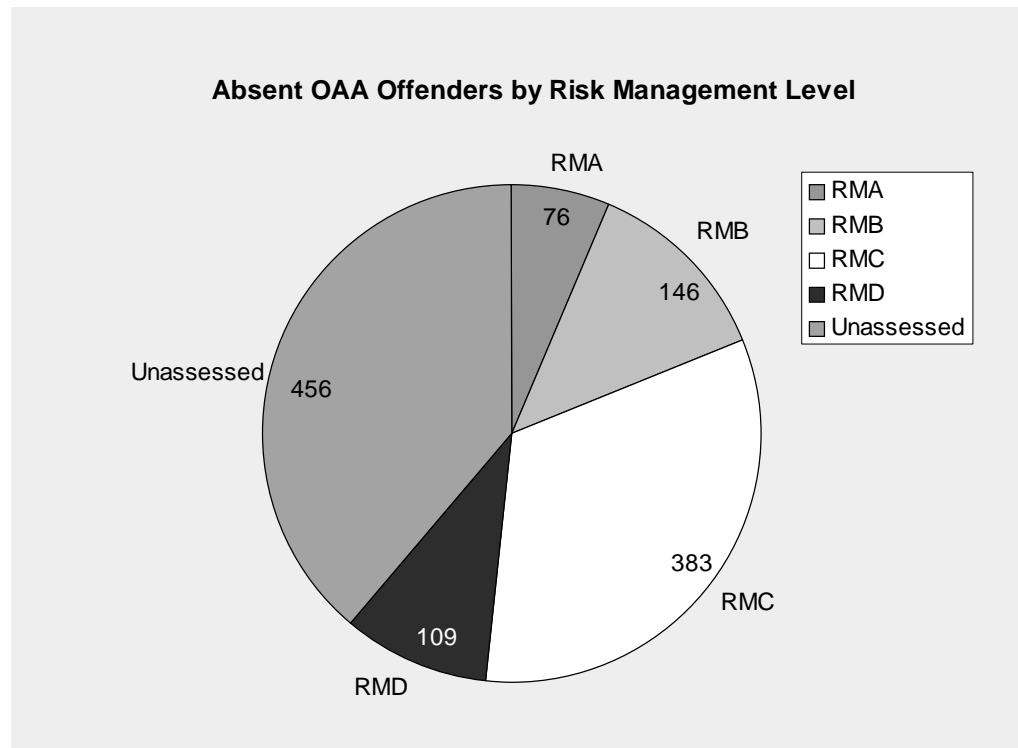
Chart 1



The aforementioned literature review conclusions coincide with the current status of what types of OAA offenders are absenting themselves from supervision. The most risky and dangerous offenders (RMAs) constitute only 10.6 percent of the OAA absconder population. The less risky offenders (RMCs) make up over half of the OAA absconder population at 53.6 percent. However, more research is needed to determine the type of behavior these offenders are engaging in while absent from supervision.

From analyzing the frequency distribution of different risk level (OAA) offenders who are absent from supervision as of July 2001, the most alarming figure concerns those who had not yet had a risk level assigned. Of the 1170 OAA offenders on ADA status, 456 had absented themselves from supervision before they were assessed and given a risk management level (see chart 2). If a fugitive unit were to focus resources on high risk offenders and allocate funds based on current data, the unit would be overlooking the largest population of absconders (many who would certainly be high risk if they had been assessed). This means the Department knows very little of the risk to re-offend of many of the OAA offenders that staff are unable to locate.

**Chart 2**



As part of this study, a review of the Offender Based Tracking System (OBTS) electronic chronology notes made by staff for a sample of offenders on “escape status” was conducted. There is a definite trend for there to be little activity on a case once a warrant has been issued. Little or no proactive procedures are being utilized to relocate the absconder. For those offenders who do have chrono entries after a warrant has been issued, it is most common to see new arrest information described. From this rudimentary inquiry, we found that it was not uncommon for the last data entry to be more than five months old. While the sample in this particular review was not large enough to be used to describe the current practices of locating absconders in Washington, it did provide some information on how the Department is currently dealing with absconders. Coupled with informal interviews with various Department community corrections employees, the information from the chrono presents a reasonable picture of how absconders are handled. Once a warrant is issued, community corrections staff play a largely passive role.

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## **WHAT WASHINGTON STATE HAS DONE REGARDING FUGITIVE UNITS**

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Based on Department employee interviews throughout various regions, the general practice in dealing with absconders throughout Washington is fairly consistent. If an offender has not reported as required and the CCO has made a reasonable attempt to locate the offender, a bench warrant or Secretary's warrant is requested and, after a certain amount of time without action, the case is filed to a banked caseload. However, there have been some organized attempts at locating wanted offenders in Washington. The Whatcom County Fugitive Apprehension Task Force and the Seattle Fugitive Apprehension Team are prime examples. While at one point each was much stronger, they have managed to continue operating despite competing resource demands. Other initiatives will be described as well.



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## NORTHWEST REGION & WHATCOM COUNTY

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### **History and Goals Whatcom County Fugitive Apprehension Task Force**

In 1998, Gregg Freeman (NW FA), Eric Petersen (NW CCO3), Thad Allen (NW CCO3), and Bruce Johnson (then NW CCO 3) recognized the large volume (567) of unserved bench warrants within the Bellingham Department office. Subsequently the Whatcom County Fugitive Apprehension Task Force (Task Force) was developed to proactively deal with absconders. Before its development, the accustomed procedure “was to close bench warrant cases to an unaudited, banked caseload when the warrant was issued regardless of the offender’s criminal history or potential for violence” (GSQIA 2000, 1). Essentially, absconders would be detected when they came into contact with law enforcement agencies during investigations of new crimes or traffic violations (Buisch 2001, 65; GSQIA 2000, 1). This practice is currently typical of other regions within the Department. Prior to this Task Force, there was no cooperative, proactive effort in attempting to apprehend wanted persons in Whatcom County (GSQIA 2000, 1).

Attempting to construct a resolution, the Department (Freeman, Petersen, Allen, and Johnson) hosted a focus group with other law enforcement agencies within Whatcom County. Unserved bench warrants was a shared problem. From this meeting, it was agreed that a multi-agency, strategic approach would be necessary. The cooperative task force would incorporate a wide variety of community partners and interests that would enhance tracking capabilities and expand different sources of information on absconders (Buisch 2001, 65; GSQIA 2000, 3). The focus group drafted a list of criteria to help prioritize their search efforts and, from this, a “Wanted Persons Worksheet” was developed along with a “Wanted Persons Screening Form” (Buisch 2001, 65; Peterson 2001). Furthermore, operational procedures and information sharing processes were proposed. Specifically, the Department offered to provide several means of facilitating the function of the Task Force through intelligence gathering, priority screening, information sharing, warrant services, data management, and quarterly feedback summaries (GSQIA 2000, 2).

The goal of the Task Force would not only be to apprehend absconders who posed the greatest risk of committing a new crime against another person, but also to reinforce the credibility of the system and the conditions of supervision (GSQIA 2000, 6). The Task Force would intend to provide better correctional services to citizens of Whatcom County with a focus on public safety and an effort to increase internal communication between law enforcement agencies. The Task Force was also to reflect the essence of the Department’s mission by “enhancing community safety by collaborating with its criminal justice partners, victims, citizens, and other stakeholders; administering criminal sanctions and effective correctional programs; and providing leadership for the future” (GSQIA 2000, 3).

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## Operations

When an offender has absconded and a warrant has been issued, his/her file is transferred to Department Task Force officers. The Task Force CCO would review the offender's Department file and run a complete criminal history check. The Task Force CCO completes a Wanted Persons Screening Form, which utilizes a three-level system of risk classification based on a criteria list that was developed during the focus group (Petersen 2001). This analysis is point based (predicated on risk criteria) and categorizes the offenders in one of three levels, each requiring different consideration. If an offender is assigned to level 1, his/her file is transferred to the banked caseload, which requires no additional effort in attempting to locate the absconder. Being ranked as a level 2 would require the completion of the Wanted Persons Worksheet and subsequent circulation to local law enforcement (Petersen 2001). When an absconder is assigned to level 3 (the highest risk category), a Wanted Persons Worksheet is completed and the file is then assigned for fugitive apprehension. Assigning an offender for fugitive apprehension involves several processes beginning with inter-agency circulation of the Wanted Persons Worksheet. The CCO will then research the absconder's last known addresses given to various agencies and statewide databases. Family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances and past employers will be contacted for any information regarding the absconder (GSQIA 2000, 6; Petersen 2001). Time and effort in researching the background, daily living and working patterns, and frequented locations of the level 3 absconders is the main difference between locating level 2 and level 3 absconders.

Along with inter-agency cooperation, the Task Force developed partnerships with non-criminal justice agencies. TCI/AT&T cable broadcasts targeted absconders twice daily, and every Tuesday the *Bellingham Herald* printed a 'Most Wanted' section, featuring one level 3 offender (GSQIA 2000, 5; Buisch 2001, 65; Petersen 2001). Western Washington University and the university police offered web design and upkeep services that enabled the Task Force to post a complete list of bench warrant offenders. This list was made available to the community and local police agencies (GSQIA 2000, 5; Buisch 2001, 65; Petersen 2001). Also, the Department set up a fugitive tip line which allowed the community to contact the Task Force 24 hours a day on a confidential voice mail system (GSQIA 2000, 5).

In addition to the major elements of the Task Force, a database was created to track input and output data (GSQIA 2000, 5; Petersen 2001). The database was to be updated whenever new cases were screened or warrants were served. The information was used to facilitate equal caseload distribution as well. Furthermore, the Department used the data to "provide quarterly updates for participating agencies as well as recognition for the contributions of [the] participating non-justice partners" (GSQIA 2000, 5).

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## Results

Based on data gathered from the Task Force database, “in 1999, 66% of [the] priority level 3 population and 63% of [the] priority level 2 offenders were arrested” (GSQIA 2000, 6). Comparatively, the level 1 offender return rate was 31 percent (GSQIA 2000, 6). Eighty percent of all level 3 apprehensions were made by the multi-agency effort (GSQIA 2000, 6). “Our database shows conclusively that these arrests would not have been made without the ‘catalyst’ role played by the Department. We believe this is important information for planning future Department activities in support of fugitive apprehension” (GSQIA 2000, 6). As for the tip line, web site, and cable channel, data was collected as well. The tip line received 67 calls in the first seven months, averaging out to between two or three calls per week (GSQIA 2000, 5). Within the first seven months of airing the ‘Crime Watch’ television bulletin, it produced a 52 percent arrest rate for the absconders that were shown (GSQIA 2000, 5). The *Bellingham Herald* produced a return rate of 54 percent and on several occasions arrests were made within hours after the paper had been distributed throughout the community (GSQIA 2000, 5).

## Current Status of the Bellingham Fugitive Apprehension Team

Currently, Eric Peterson (NW CCO 3) is the only Department representative actively involved with the Whatcom County Fugitive Apprehension Task Force. “Unfortunately, because of a lack of resources, Petersen now is maintaining the program by himself during what little spare time he has. But he says he is committed to keeping it going even if he only has time to screen cases and check tips” (Buisch 2001, 65). From analyzing the database that Petersen continues to maintain, he has screened 304 absconders (from January 6, 2000 to July 5, 2001) and 64.5 percent have already been apprehended. A deeper analysis would be needed to infer causality.

The *Bellingham Herald* no longer runs the weekly ‘Most Wanted’ feature. A spokesperson from the *Herald* explained that they would have continued to run the feature but stopped receiving new faxes of wanted offenders. The spokesperson expressed interest in continued to run the ‘Most Wanted’ feature. The web site continues to be maintained by WWU police via updates from Petersen. However, the web director is not being told when warrants are served which has created a backlog of apprehended offenders on the site. The cable channel continues to air daily and no data was available for analysis.

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## WEST CENTRAL REGION & KING COUNTY

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### **History and Goals Seattle Fugitive Apprehension Team**

The Seattle Fugitive Apprehension Team (SEAFAT) is another inter-agency partnership that exists within Washington. Headquartered by the FBI, SEAFAT is federally funded and consists of a partnership between the FBI, the Seattle Police Department, the King County Sheriff's office, and the Department of Corrections (Pinkerton 2001; Pineda 2001; [www.seattle.fbi.gov](http://www.seattle.fbi.gov); [www.sea-king-crimestoppers.org](http://www.sea-king-crimestoppers.org)). During an informal telephone interview with Gregg Freeman (NW FA), he recalled this fugitive unit as being the most organized fugitive unit in the history of Washington.

While there is no substantive written material or documented feedback on SEAFAT, it appears that its main goal is to proactively locate and apprehend violent fugitives with outstanding felony warrants wanted by all participating agencies ([www.seattle.fbi.gov/contact/fo/seattle/violent.htm](http://www.seattle.fbi.gov/contact/fo/seattle/violent.htm)).

### **Operations**

The Department's role in SEAFAT includes providing one paid position to work within and for the team. Henry Pineda is the current Department member of SEAFAT. He receives his salary from the Department and the FBI pays for any overtime (Pineda 2001). The Department SEAFAT member conducts surveillance and pursues absconders who have been referred to him by other community corrections officers, but aids and assists in the apprehension of other wanted persons not under the supervision of the Department.

### **Results**

It is reported that the unit has made 2,000 arrests of wanted offenders; however, the time frame and other pertinent information concerning this data has yet to be learned ([www.seattle.fbi.gov/contact/fo/seattle/violent.htm](http://www.seattle.fbi.gov/contact/fo/seattle/violent.htm)).

### **Current Status of SEAFAT**

In conversation with Pineda, it was mentioned that the FBI was planning to transfer headquarters and oversight responsibilities to the U.S. Marshals Service. This change is reported to occur across the country (Pineda 2001).

### **History and Goals Smart Partners**

Although this program is not a fugitive unit, the relevance of the Smart Partners Program is that it offers input into police-corrections partnerships and manifests the importance of information sharing. The Smart Partners Program may also provide important information and feedback concerning inter-agency cooperation and ways to achieve mutual compatibility.

Essentially, Smart Partners is an enhanced supervision program that involves the joint effort of local police and the Department to ensure offender accountability. This

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program began as a collaboration between the Washington Department of Corrections and the Redmond Police Department.

Prior to its inception in 1994, Steve Marrs (WC CCO – Bellevue) met with Terry Morgan (Commander of the Redmond Police Department) to begin addressing common problems. When Redmond police started conducting neighborhood sweeps in the 1990s, they noticed a high percentage of parolees who were out late with other criminals (Parent 1999, 20). Since both agencies (the Department and local police) dealt with the same offenders, possessed information that could be useful to the other, and shared goals of promoting public safety, they discussed ways to exchange information and achieve their common goals more effectively (Parent 1999, 20).

The main goals of Smart Partners is to “provide additional surveillance of offenders released from prison to community custody, and to develop inexpensive and efficient ways for police and community corrections officers to share information about persons under the Department supervision” (Parent 1999, 20).

## **Operations**

There are three components to the Smart Partners program. The first involves unannounced curfew checks on specifically targeted offenders. Police officers who have volunteered for the program receive a small caseload of dangerous offenders on community custody. The officers are recruited and trained by the Department and conduct the random curfew checks on offenders in their caseload once or twice per week (Parent 1999, 20,21). “If offenders are found to be in violation of their conditions of supervision, the police officer files a violation report. The CCO responds to the violation report the next working day and updates the police officers with the outcome of the violation discovery” (Parent 1999, 21).

The second component involves the notification from police officers to community corrections officers whenever an offender has been stopped and interrogated (but not arrested) (Parent 1999, 21). Any time a police officer questions a suspicious person, a field interview report (FIR) is filled out. The Smart Partners program merely requires that the FIR cards be screened from the Washington State Crime Information System (WASCIS) to determine if the suspects are under the supervision of the Department (Parent 1999, 21). For each active Department case, the police circulate the FIR card back to the Department, which may include violations of conditions even though the offender may not have committed a new crime. Appropriate actions are taken to address the violations and, just as in the first component of Smart Partners, CCOs will provide feedback to the officers who had contributed to the discovery. “The feedback to the patrol officers gives them added incentive to be conscientious about completing FIR cards” (Parent 1999, 21).

The third component involves jail staff notifying the Department when community custody offenders have been arrested and jailed. From screening WASCIS, jail staff can determine if an arrestee’s already under Department supervision. If offenders are

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in fact on community supervision, the jail staff will fax the assigned CCO a copy of the arrest information. In warranted circumstances CCOs could issue detainers to keep the offender in jail long enough to respond to the violation (Parent 1999, 21). This third component enhances knowledge about Department offender activity, enabling CCOs to learn about new arrests weeks or even months earlier (Parent 1999, 21).

## **Results**

One of the most valuable, albeit unintended, results has been the computerization of the FIR cards and their integration into the Homicide Investigative Tracking System (HITS) (Parent 1999, 22). Prior to this innovation, there was no way for police in one county to know about FIR cards in another. Now police can enter FIR cards into HITS which immediately sends an e-mail copy of the FIR to the offender's CCO. This eliminates the delay in manually sending FIR cards to the Department regional offices. Community corrections officers receive the most current updates of their offenders' behavior, and whether or not they are in violation of any conditions. The computerization of FIR cards enhances the level and quality of Department supervision capabilities.

Although the Smart Partners program has not been formally evaluated, it expanded to 50 cities throughout Washington in its first four years of operation. In general, the Smart Partners program expands the information gathering capabilities of community custody officers and provides the most current accounts of offender behavior under Department supervision (Parent 1999, 22). "The innovations accomplish this with little added burden or cost to the system, at least in terms of immediate personnel costs for police officers, jailers, and CCOs" (Parent 1999, 21).

## **History and Goals Seattle Warrants Unit**

In response to complaints made by downtown Seattle businesses about drug dealers and increased violence during the mid-1990s, the Division of Community of Corrections and the Seattle Police Department (SPD) teamed together to address the problem. Their partnership, which has since been disbanded, targeted offenders under the supervision of the Department who frequented high drug activity areas (Pinkerton 2001). The Seattle Warrants Unit sought to identify offenders who were in areas prohibited by the conditions of their supervision (Pinkerton 2001). Essentially the Seattle Warrants Unit was an enhanced inter-agency supervision effort.

## **Operations**

The Seattle Warrants Unit was divided into three five-person teams made up of representatives from both the Department and the SPD (Pinkerton 2001). Utilizing both cars and bikes, the teams would disperse among known drug markets and interview or interrogate suspicious people (Pinkerton 2001). From screening the Offender Based Tracking System (OBTs), suspects under Department supervision were identified and subsequently dealt with (Corrections Compendium 1995, 27). Under certain criteria, the Department offenders could be detained. If they were not

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detained, they were informed to report the following morning to their assigned CCO. Any relevant information concerning the questioned offender, including new addresses and telephone numbers, were collected and sent via email to the offender's CCO (Corrections Compendium 1995, 27).

## **Results**

The ability to utilize the authority of the Department to remove their offenders out of prohibited areas provided a valuable tool to the SPD (Corrections Compendium 1995, 27). Participating CCOs indicated that the extra effort and work was worth being able to provide valuable information to specific CCOs about their clients' behavior (Pinkerton 2001). Data on the Seattle Warrants Unit was collected but has yet to be found or analyzed for the purposes of this paper.

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## SOUTHWEST REGION

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### Clark County

The TRAK (Technology to Recover Abducted Kids) system in Vancouver, La Center, and Clark County, Washington, helps track fugitives (among other missing/wanted persons) through a descriptive database available to police and other agencies. While the Southwest Region of the Department and law enforcement agencies in Clark County technically do not have a fugitive unit, the TRAK software has the ability to aid in the location of absconders by transmitting important information quickly to pre-loaded law enforcement contacts. The software allows immediate electronic transfer of high-resolution photo announcements to any government or private agency when an offender or person needs to be located. The TRAK software is being used throughout the nation to locate wanted or missing persons (Goodlett 2000, B1; <http://socialteck.trak.org>).

### Thurston County

To apprehend wanted offenders, the Crime Stoppers organization works in cooperation with the Thurston County Prosecutor's Office. Every week, Crime Stoppers provides *The Olympian* with a name and descriptive information of one wanted offender in an effort to rearrest him/her ([www.sea-king-crimestoppers.org](http://www.sea-king-crimestoppers.org)).



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## NORTHEAST REGION & SPOKANE COUNTY

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### **History and Mission U.S. Marshals Ad Hoc Fugitive Task Force**

While nothing is concrete, the Northeast Region of the Department is currently in the process of formalizing an agreement with the U.S. Marshals Service to establish an Ad Hoc Fugitive Task Force (Task Force) (Cyrus McLean 2001). After speaking with Cyrus McLean and reviewing the 'Memo of Understanding' draft between the Department and the Marshals Service, it appears that the U.S. Marshals Service is interested in joining various law enforcement agencies to participate in intermittent sweeps targeting wanted state and federal offenders.

Although headquartered by the U.S. Marshals Service, they are asking that the Task Force and subsequent participation, planning, policies and directives be a joint responsibility among the various agencies.

The drafted mission or goal of the Task Force is to increase public safety through jointly apprehending wanted offenders by all participating agencies.

### **Operations**

It is proposed to operate the Task Force in a piecemeal fashion by simply responding to the needs of the various agencies. Agency resources will be used, as well as possible, to apprehend higher priority offenders. Operations management will be the sole responsibility of the U.S. Marshals Service. They are asking that each participating agency provide at least one supervisor to accept apprehension requests and to manage the apprehension teams. Once the teams are formed, the Marshals Service requests that at least one representative be present during the periodic sweeps. In deciding which fugitives to apprehend, the head operational supervisor from the Marshals Service will confer with each assigned agency supervisor to ensure equal fugitive distributions and appropriate team size. It is proposed that each participating agency will be held responsible for their members' actions, financing equipment furnished to the Task Force, informant compensation for their wanted offenders, their employees' monetary compensation, and completing their own records and reports. In constructing the apprehension teams and subsequent assignments, "the supervisors from all participating agencies will decide which state and federal cases should become Task Force cases," which employees will be assigned to the team, and when to activate the teams (MOU 2001, 2).

### **Results**

The aforementioned Task Force has only been proposed. No official agreements or statements of confirmation have been made. It is unknown if and when the DOC will become involved in the Ad Hoc Fugitive Task Force.

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## WHAT OTHER STATES HAVE DONE REGARDING FUGITIVE UNITS

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Many states have implemented enhanced units to proactively seek out wanted offenders. Often these enhanced units target dangerous and violent offenders who pose the greatest risk to public safety. Fugitive units often operate in cooperation with local law enforcement agencies and utilize many tactical strategies such as team sweeps and surveillance stakeouts. Intensive training is often a priority and many enhanced units require the use of personal safety equipment. "Different agencies have pursued different paths, but the goals have been to increase the accountability of the system and the offender" (Taxman & Cherkos 1995, 52). Although not included in this paper, Nevada, South Carolina, Virginia, Arizona, Illinois, Connecticut, and New York all have some form of an organized fugitive unit that has been mentioned in the recent academic literature. The states mentioned hereafter had substantial written information available, were relevant for comparative purposes, or were positively mentioned in current academic literature and representatives were available for interviews.

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## WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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### **History and Mission Wisconsin Absconder Unit**

In 1996, Wisconsin Governor Thompson appointed a Task Force to develop a community corrections and confinement section within their department. The subsequent proposal was rejected by the Wisconsin legislature but later apportioned approximately \$8.8 million for the definitive purpose of “enhancing public safety in Southeastern Wisconsin,” a particularly disorganized and prevalent crime area (Edwards 1999, 8). Prior to its inception, the money was allocated for use only in Dane and Racine counties. Instead of a community corrections and confinement program throughout Wisconsin, the Racine Area Project (RAP) was developed in its place. The RAP would implement a thoroughly planned and highly intricate community supervision program in Racine County. A control program would be located in Dane County for the specific purposes of evaluating the RAP. The mission of the RAP is similar to the mission of the OAA in that it is designed to target and actively supervise high-risk offenders. The OAA and the RAP both seek to “increase public safety by reducing new criminal behavior committed by offenders” (Edwards 1999, 9). Much of the RAP’s mission has put a strong emphasis on “localized understandings of public safety and the enhanced supervision of high risk offenders” (Edwards 1999, 10).

This influence can be found throughout the entire structure of RAP, [and] from these influences, RAP has evolved into a process that promotes and indeed requires that attention be directed towards the ‘four critical success factors’ that are viewed as essential to successful supervision (stable employment, stable residence, alcohol/drug treatment and strong connections to family and/or community support). Virtually every aspect of RAP is designed to facilitate and support the existence of these factors, which are viewed as necessary precursors to offender success and public safety (Edwards 1999, 11).

It is important to learn where the Wisconsin Absconder Unit fits within the RAP especially because the unit becomes involved very early on in the community supervision process, falling consistent with its mission. The RAP is highly fragmented but it remains an interconnected system of checks and balances. The organizational structure of RAP is made up of several categories: (1) intake, (2) field agents (including the absconder unit and other specialty units including offender supervision), (3) the day reporting center and other treatment options, and (4) data collection and evaluation (Edwards 1999, 12). As you can see, the Absconder Unit is merely one of many pieces that make up the RAP and contribute to its overall mission.

The absconder unit was developed to reduce offender anonymity in the community and to focus resources and effort in relocating high-risk offenders for immediate intervention (Edwards 1999, 26). One main goal is to encourage the high-risk

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absconders to meet with their assigned field agent before their violations accumulate and revocation is recommended. If this goal is not achieved or if an absconder is engaging in criminal behavior when they are found, they are immediately detained and dealt with accordingly.

## **Operations**

The absconder unit was incorporated into the RAP in 1998 and consists of two ten-agent units that operate first and second shifts, seven days a week from 7:00 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.

The first time the absconder unit becomes involved in the community supervision process, or RAP process, is after an offender has been sentenced. Offenders who are not sent to prison are immediately directed to the Law Enforcement Center (LEC), which is located directly outside the courtroom. This process is also conducted in jail or prison prior to release (Edwards 1999, 15). It is during this phase that pertinent information about an offender is gathered specifically for the absconder unit (Edwards 1999, 15). The LEC agent prepares an LEC intake form, an initial intake questionnaire, takes a photo of the offender, and goes over the rules of supervision (Edwards 1999, 15 & 16). The LEC agent then schedules a time for the offender and any available family members to attend an orientation introducing them to the RAP. The family orientation is coordinated by an intake agent who provides information and answers questions about the RAP. The absconder unit sends representatives to discuss various incentives and repercussions for offender behavior while under supervision (Edwards 1999, 17). While there are several other intake and general supervision processes to assess risk levels and determine treatment options, the next time the absconder unit becomes involved is when a field agent cannot locate one of their high-risk offenders. "Theses offenders include probationers, parolees, escapees, and offenders who have failed to report to jail following an out of custody revocation" (PREFACE 2001, 1).

After unsuccessfully trying to locate a wanted offender, the assigned field agent will fill out an apprehension request (PREFACE 2001, 1). This request is sent to the absconder unit within the corresponding county. The request is then assigned to one of ten agents (PREFACE 2001, 1). Once the absconder unit agent receives the apprehension request, they will begin their search efforts. Agents will use a variety of means to try locating the absconder starting with checking the offender's last known address. Attempts will be made to contact collaterals, phone books will be referenced, and state and national databases will be screened. Internet searches are also conducted which can include referencing the Social Security death index, the people search and reverse directory, and other Wisconsin law enforcement agency sites (PREFACE 2001, 1). Whether or not an offender is apprehended or merely instructed to report to their field agent is at the discretion of the absconder unit. The focus is on intervening before new criminal behavior is committed or before too many violations occur as to warrant revocation. If reporting instructions will not be sufficient to achieve

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this goal, the absconder must be taken into custody (Edwards 1999, 27).

The absconder unit tracks their progress, search results, offender information, and how absconders are relocated (i.e., returned on their own terms, rearrested on new charges, etc.) on an internal database (Wisconsin Absconder Unit Manual 1999, 1). This information is recorded for organizational as well as evaluative purposes.

The absconder unit utilizes a variety of equipment and training sessions to keep agents safe. When searching and apprehending absconders, the unit also relies on the assistance of other law enforcement agencies within Wisconsin.

## **Results**

While the absconder unit has not been formally evaluated, information from their database on the success of their work has warranted some procedural and organizational changes (Bucholtz 2001). The unit is currently in the process of planned change. The RAP has been formally evaluated and has been merited with having the potential to be the highest-scored enhanced supervision to date. "In fact, it will highly outscore any like programs . . . scored to date," said Edward Latessa, Ph.D., who administered the CPAI [Correctional Program Assessment Instrument] report (Edwards 1999, 47). From informal interviews conducted by Edwards, it was reported that "the absconder unit has produced immediate results on many occasions, and that the enhanced level of communication as a result of this program is exceptional" (1999, 27). This informal response is consistent with other informal responses made about fugitive units throughout the country, including the Whatcom County Fugitive Apprehension Team. The Wisconsin Absconder Unit policies and procedures manual along with operational forms is available upon request, as it may be useful for strategic planning.

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## OREGON DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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### **History and Mission Oregon Fugitive Apprehension Unit**

In 1992 the Oregon Department of Corrections established their Fugitive Apprehension Unit to proactively locate offenders who have escaped from prison or walked away from work crew (ODOC 2001, 1). In 1994, the unit was expanded to include the apprehension of offenders who had escaped from community supervision. The unit is in cooperation with other law enforcement agencies and district attorneys and is primarily concerned with enhancing public safety. The absconder unit within the Fugitive Apprehension Unit “focuses on locating the most high risk, dangerous offenders” and works jointly with other law enforcement agencies (ODOC 2001, 2). The unit also utilizes a web site to locate offenders and reduce offender anonymity.

### **Operations**

The unit is divided into two sections, one in the west and one in the east. The absconder unit is located within the west unit. The main units are comprised of department inspectors and one correctional counselor that deals specifically with the absconder unit. The unit develops intelligence to locate offenders by researching where they were last seen and by making collateral contacts. The unit operates during regular working hours and is on call 24 hours a day in case of an emergency. There was no evaluative feedback or data available for analysis.

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## CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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### **History and Mission Sacramento Parolee-At-Large Project**

In 1996, after reviewing data on absconders, the California Parole and Community Services Law Enforcement Consortium suggested that the California Department of Corrections (CDC) decrease the number of wanted offenders. Prior to the development of the Parolee-At-Large (PAL) Apprehension Teams project, the CDC did not actively pursue offenders who had absconded from community supervision. If no contact had been made with a parole agent after 30 days, a warrant would be issued and the absconder's sentence would be tolled or suspended, thus rendering their status "inactive." An inactive parolee no longer remained part of the funding base. Any organized or proactive effort to relocate absconders would solicit money from an active caseload supervision fund. Therefore, the CDC sought funding to create a program that would proactively search for and apprehend parolees that were at large (Parent 1999, 26).

With the support of legislative funding, the PAL Apprehension Teams are developed to locate all wanted parolees, with a concentration on apprehending violent and dangerous absconders. The PAL Apprehension Teams are designed to work in cooperation with all levels of law enforcement throughout California and were specifically required to provide information on absconders, share resources, and conduct joint apprehension operations with them as well (Parent 1999, 26).

The main goals of the PAL Apprehension Teams are to reduce the number of wanted offenders, reduce the crimes committed by absconders while unsupervised, enhance and increase inter-agency information sharing, and develop joint law enforcement apprehension strategies (Parent 1999, 26).

### **Operations**

There are eight separate PAL Apprehension Teams located throughout California. One statewide manager administers all eight teams with one supervisor at each of the eight branches. The eight teams consist of two to six PAL agents (Parent 1999, 26). The PAL agents have caseloads that consist only of wanted offenders and their sole duty is to relocate and apprehend them. "The CDC recognized from the start that it would need cooperation from law enforcement to achieve the PAL Apprehension Teams' goals. As a result, each PAL Apprehension Team was charged with establishing partnerships with federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies" (Parent 1999, 26). The focus of the multi-agency cooperation is on improving the circulation and quality of information that would aid in the apprehension of absconders.

PAL Apprehension Teams conduct their own arrests of absconders but will arrange for local police assistance prior to apprehending a particularly dangerous offender or

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apprehending in a potentially dangerous environment (Parent 1999, 26). Police backup assistance is available to the PAL Apprehension Teams when a situation gets out of hand.

Periodic multi-agency sweeps are conducted in specific neighborhoods where absconders are thought to live or frequent (Parent 1999, 26). From a list of offenders' last known addresses, the joint agencies will move from one residence to the next. Often non-absconders are found during the sweeps and, if they are in violation of their supervision conditions, they are apprehended as well (Parent 1999, 26).

To ensure agent safety, PAL Apprehension Team members train for over 200 hours during their first year, specifically in entry tactics, firearms, and investigation strategies (Parent 1999, 27). Additionally, agents are required to wear bulletproof vests, carry firearms, and carry inter-agency radios, should police backup become necessary.

## **Results**

Within the first year of the PAL Apprehension Team project, more than 2,000 apprehensions were made. From projected 1996-97 absconder levels, it was estimated that absconder cases were reduced by more than 1,000 (Parent 1999, 27). An unintended consequence of the PAL Apprehension Team efforts included the confiscation of over 300 firearms (Parent 1999, 27). One of the eight branch supervisors noted that their work was "accomplished without injury to parole agents or their law enforcement partners and without a single public complaint or lawsuit" (Parent 1999, 27).

## **History and Mission San Francisco Fugitive Recovery Enforcement Team**

In 1993, the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) asked the Parole and Community Services Division of the CDC and other federal and local law enforcement agencies to participate in a task force to reduce crimes committed by wanted offenders (Parent 1999, 27). From their initial meeting, it was decided that a fugitive unit would be needed to apprehend parolees who were reoffending. Since the CDC had the authority to remove their offenders out of certain prohibited areas during certain times of the day, the SFPD thought that this provided for an excellent way to control crime. As a result, the Fugitive Recovery Enforcement Team (FRET) was developed (Parent 1999, 27).

While the FRET is a combined effort, the two agencies that make up the team have different objectives. The SFPD's goal is simply to control crime. The main goal of the CDC's Parole Division is also to control crime, but additional objectives are to target parole violators, bring absconders back under more controlled supervision, require appropriate treatment, or to recommend that their terms be revoked (Parent 1999, 27).



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## **Operations**

When the FRET was first in operation, the team experienced serious employee disagreement between the different agencies. This lack of accord required a significant amount of attention during the initial phases of FRET implementation. Administrators explained that “careful selection of FRET staff and open communication” among agents from both agencies have been key to becoming a cohesive and effective unit (Parent 1999, 27). Those who volunteered for the team and had proactive ideologies were selected first and were subsequently cross-trained to provide better understanding and consideration of their own and their counterparts’ jobs. Selecting open minded and proactively oriented agents to participate in the FRET not only solved internal program issues but also helped bridge a gap between the CDC and the SFPD, who were historically at odds with each other (Parent 1999, 27).

Targeting specific absconders, the team conducts sweeps three times per month, serving warrants whenever the offenders are located (Parent 1999, 27). The FRET uses background information on absconders gathered prior to their release from jail or prison and conducts the sweeps in patrol cars.

## **Results**

In the FRET’s first five years of operation, approximately 5,000 warrants were served to absconders. During this time frame, the level of absconders in San Francisco dropped by 12 percent (Parent 1999, 27).

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## MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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### **History and Mission Hennepin County Fugitive Apprehension Program**

In 1982, the Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections developed the Fugitive Apprehension Program (FAP) (Parent et al. 1994, 28). Prior to the implementation of the FAP, the common practice in dealing with absconders was to request a warrant and wait for the offender to be picked up for a new crime or for an officer to discover the warrant during another type of investigation (Parent 1999, 28). The Minnesota DOC took no proactive measures to apprehend absconders. This practice eventually led to a very high percentage of wanted offenders. Sixty percent of absconders in Minnesota were from Hennepin County and two-thirds of them were violent offenders (Parent 1999, 28). Subsequently a partnership with the local and county law enforcement agencies led to the development of the FAP. The FAP was designed to “locate parole and probation absconders, apprehend them, and return them to custody and supervision” (Parent 1999, 28). The main goals of FAP include increasing offender accountability, increasing FAP presence in the community to deter future absconding, and relocating and apprehending absconders (Parent 1999, 28; Parent et al. 1994, 28).

### **Operations**

FAP targets offenders who have committed multiple offenses, especially crimes committed against other people, crimes with weapons, repeat sex crimes, and crimes committed by mentally ill and dangerous offenders (Parent 1999, 28). Within Hennepin County, there are only two agents assigned to the FAP. When a parole or probation officer cannot locate an offender within their caseload, a notice is sent to the FAP. FAP agents begin researching the absconders’ background including last known addresses and telephone numbers. They interview any known collaterals about the absconders’ possible whereabouts and begin searching any given areas. FAP agent safety is a priority and when conducting an arrest they wear bulletproof vests, carry police radios, and pepper spray. Careful attention is paid to how the apprehension will be carried out. The two FAP agents plan according to the risk posed by the offender, often arranging for a joint operation with the local police. Most often apprehensions occur without incident, but police are available for backup.

Along with the two FAP agents, one support staff person assists in the coordination of the Fugitive Apprehension Program. From updating databases on the status of offenders to conducting internet searches to circulating new warrants among various local law enforcement agencies, the support staff person plays an integral role (Parent 1999, 28).

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## **Results**

Having probation/parole officers involved in the apprehension process adds credibility to the Department of Corrections with other law enforcement agencies. When the DOC “demonstrated its commitment to seeking out and apprehending absconders, law enforcement agencies became more willing to provide backup as needed in routine cases and direct assistance in high-risk cases” (Parent 1999, 28). The FAP has been in operation for almost 20 years but no evaluation has been conducted. However, police officers and corrections employees consider their joint effort as standard procedure (Parent 1999, 28).

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## CONCLUSION

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The Department needs to determine the best way to design and implement a fugitive unit to respond to violators of community custody supervision because absconders pose a threat to the effectiveness of the Offender Accountability Act (OAA), both in terms of organization and offender accountability. The failure of offenders to follow their conditions of supervision by absconding burdens the criminal justice system, undermines the integrity of community custody and sentencing processes, and poses an increased risk to public safety (Taxman & Cherkos 1995, 46-52).

OAA policies and procedures currently provide many elements that would be conducive to operating a successful fugitive unit. Research has shown that early recognition of escape, coupled with proactive measures to apprehend the wanted offender, may result in higher apprehension levels. The length of time an offender is on escape status has shown to be an important variable in location and apprehension as well. Because the OAA has largely removed the courts from the process of issuing bench warrants, CCOs should be able to receive a Secretary's warrant within 24 hours, thus notifying local law enforcement agencies of escapes 61 days earlier (Holm & Jetzer 2000, 20). Early recognition of an escape in addition to issuing a warrant within 24 hours would not only enhance apprehension levels but also reduce the amount of time the offender was unsupervised in the community.

Essentially "a proactive, probation-based warrants unit [or fugitive unit] appears to be an effective strategy for locating and apprehending absconders" (Taxman & Byrne 1994, 21). Subsequently, an appropriately designed and thoroughly planned fugitive unit would appear to provide control and intervention methods consistent with the goals of the OAA and the mission of the DOC. More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of focusing resources only on locating high-risk absconders. The highly planned and articulated Wisconsin Department of Corrections Absconder Unit which had previously targeted only high-risk absconders is currently in the process of planned change based on the results of their evaluation.

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